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AUTHOR Rhea, David
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ABSTRACT

This document is an outline for a three-week unit of study focusing on religious syncretism in Mexico as part of a community college course in comparative religions or philosophy of religion. While this outline is intended to give information and direction to the instructor wishing to use Mexico as an example of religious syncretism, unit goals and objectives for students are included. The unit is intended to consist primarily of lectures supplemented by sets of 35mm slides specially prepared for the unit. An annotated bibliography is attached. (JDS)

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RELIGIOUS SYNCRETISM IN MEXICO

Project Mexico
June 26 - August 8
1976

David Rhea
Bakersfield College
1801 Panorama Drive
Bakersfield, California 93305

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UCLA PROJECT MEXICO 1976

David Rhea--Instructor in Religion and Philosophy, Bakersfield College

Introduction

Participation in Project Mexico, 1976, through the auspices of the UCLA Latin American Studies Center has had the twin effects for me of (1) acquiring for the first time academic and systematic knowledge about Mexico and (2) developing an awareness and empathy of the cultural history and contemporary experience of the Meso-American people.

I find myself expressing to people who ask about my experience there that I "discovered" Mexico in the sense not only of it being my first visit in that country, but really my first acquaintance as well. Not having studied the language, not taken any formal course work in Latin America on any subject, not remembering any particular book I might have read on Mexico, not knowing even the basic traveler's information on what sort of clothes to pack or what the official exchange rate was, I was more naive about Mexico than the voyager Columbus was in sailing to find "the Indies." If I could say what the most effective single teaching technique is, it would be to take the student to the place being studied to see for himself what it is like. That is an opportunity logistically impossible in most instances, but I feel I was afforded that privilege of immediate study of a subject matter on Project Mexico. The consequence of this opportunity has been the feeling that I have learned so much, and learned it much better by virtue of being there. The task is to transmit this learning with its quality of immediacy to students, who will lack the opportunity of being in Mexico. To this end I have designed the following three-week unit of study.

Course Title: Comparative Religions
Western Religion
Philosophy of Religion

Unit Title: Religious Syncretism in Mexico

Rationale

My full-time course load at Bakersfield College is in the instruction of the religions of the world. Religious syncretism is one of the fundamental concepts discussed and illustrated in comparative religions and philosophy of religion courses. Third-world countries, Mexico being an example, have particularly dynamic and pervasive religious behaviors. Mexico has two viable religious traditions--the Indian paganism and the Spanish Catholicism. These two have become increasingly syncretized in the years following the initial conquest. In the past, I have used various examples to illustrate the concept of religious syncretism, e.g., Tibetan Buddhism, Sikhism, but none coming from

Western Religion history. It seems obvious that syncretism occurring in Mexico is an example taking place much closer to us with the chance that the context will be better understood. And combining together Catholicism as representative of the religious expression of native-Americans or non-European America, seems an exciting dimension offering dramatic illustrative material to use in the classroom. This unit is intended to give information and direction to the instructor wishing to use Mexico as the example of religious syncretism.

The value of this particular unit of study seems to me to lie in the organizing or systemizing of the material on the subject of religious syncretism. The instructor will note that there are three major subjects treated in the outline:
Pre-Hispanic Indian Religions
Spanish Catholicism
Syncretism

Furthermore, under "Syncretism" there are six examples used to illustrate the subject:
The Guadalupe Virgin
The Popol Vuh
The Cult of the Dead
The "Bloody Christ"
Catholic Saints from Indian Gods
Religious Healing

This structure for the outline seems to hang together logically, plus it affords a scheme to provide a variety of illustrative material. In preparing this unit, and especially the outline, I am suggesting appropriate illustrative material which is obtainable by the individual instructor for the most part. The photographic slides that I will be using can be obtained through the Latin American Studies Center at UCLA or from me directly for simply the cost of duplicating. Good luck as you make use of this Unit Outline.

RELIGIOUS SYNCRETISM IN MEXICO

Unit Goals and Objectives

As a consequence of this Unit of Study, the student will . . .

(1) Become acquainted with the concept of "religious syncretism" and its historic function in the religious life of the Mexican people.

(2) Be exposed to lecture and visual material regarding archaeological sites pertaining to Pre-Hispanic Indian religion.

(3) Be exposed to lecture and visual material regarding the Spanish Conquest of Mexico and the results of this.

(4) Be exposed to lecture and visual material regarding contemporary examples of the syncretism between Indian paganism and Spanish Catholicism.

(5) Be assigned to read hand-outs of the articles . . .
"Religious Syncretism"
"Sickness and Social Relations"
"Religion in Pre-Hispanic Central Mexico"

(6) Be expected to pass an examination on the above.

Means of Achieving Objectives

As evidenced by the above objectives, the instructor's primary duty will be to present narrative information to the students on the subjects in the outline. The format is intended to be lecture with the additional help of visual materials. The course in Western Religion that is being taught at Bakersfield College is presently structured this way.

Of course, it is intended that the student will acquire information and understanding of the subjects covered. These particular subjects have been chosen not only because they present comprehensively the concept of religious syncretism but also because they include subjects which students in the past have expressed interest in learning something about. The immediacy afforded by the proximity of the country of Mexico plus, in our locale, a significant number of Chicano students (14% at Bakersfield College, for instance) also heightens the natural interest and curiosity of this subject.

The acquiring of information and understanding can be verified by a variety of testing procedures. Typically, this instructor uses short-answer essay questions, examples of which might be . . .

"Explain how the Virgin of Guadalupe serves as an example of religious syncretism."
"Contrast the curandero and the brujo and explain the function of each."
"Trace the historical development of the Quetzacoatl Myth."

Three Week Unit: RELIGIOUS SYNCRETISM IN MEXICO

Unit Outline

Lecture I--Pre-Hispanic Indian Religions

A. The Olmec and Mayan Religions (see Biographical Reference #13)
B. The Earliest Mythologies (see BR #15)
C. The Earliest Worship Centers (see BR #9)+

Lecture II-Pre-Hispanic Indian Religions

A. The Toltec and Aztec Religions (see BR #12)
B. The Worship Centers of the Toltecs and Aztecs (see BR #9)++
C. Themes Common in the Indian Religions of Meso-America (see BR Article #5)
D. Themes Common Between Meso-American and North American Indian Religions (see BR #10)

E. The Quetzacoatl Myth and Its Development (see BR #3)

Lecture III-Spanish Catholicism

A. The Spanish Inquisition and Spanish Aggrandizement
B. Hernan Cortez--The First Conquistador
C. The Years of Conquest (see BR #6)

Lecture IV--Spanish Catholicism

A. The Years of Colonization--The Hacienda and the Church (see BR #17)+++
B. The Mexican Revolution's Impact on the Catholic Church

Lecture V--Religious Syncretism

A. Syncretism--the Theory (see BR #5, Article #3)

1) Syncretism as the imposition of beliefs on the indigenous people by the conquering people, but adapted to indigenous people, i.e., the conquerors' response.

2) Syncretism as the adaptation of the indigenous people to the mentality of their conquerors, i.e., the indigenous peoples' response.

Lecture VI--Religious Syncretism

A. Examples of Syncretism

1) The Virgin of Guadalupe (see BR #2, #5)++++

2) The Popol Vuh (see BR #8)

Lecture VII--Religious Syncretism

A. Examples of Syncretism+++++

1) The Cult of the Dead (see BR #14)

2) The "Bloody Christ" (see BR #17)

3) Catholic Saints from Indian Gods (see BR #20, #4)

Lecture VIII--Religious Syncretism

A. Religious Healing (see BR Articles #1, #4)

1) The Curandero++++++

2) The Brujo, interpreted by Carlos Casteneda

B. Indigenismo Today in Mexico

Lecture IX--Quiz on the Unit: Religious Syncretism in Mexico

Instructor Note:

Several packages of 35mm Kodak slides are developed to be used with the above outline. These are on file at the UCLA Latin American Studies Center and will be duplicated on request at instructor expense. Each of the six packages is described below.

+Slide package of archaeological sites Monte Alban and Mitla.

++Slide package of archaeological sites Tula and Teotihuacan.

+++Slide package featuring several Spanish Haciendas in the vicinity of Cuernavaca and Spanish Cathedrals in Cuernavaca, Taxco, Chalmas, and Oaxaca.

++++Slide package of the Shrine of Guadalupe in Mexico City.

+++++Some few slides of examples of the "Bloody Christ" and the Cult of the Dead

++++++Some few slides of a variety of herb markets in Mexico.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Books

1. American Automobile Association, Mexico and Central Mexico, 1976, AAA Publishers, Virginia, 1975.

A shorter guide book than the Fodor volume, but providing much of the same background on places both pre-Colombian and Spanish. This guidebook is obtainable from any office of the Southern California Automobile Club, though not sold commercially.

2. Behrens, Helen, The Virgin Mary of Guadalupe, Editorial Progreso, Mexico City, 1964, and C. J. Wahlig, Juan Diego, Editorial Progreso, Mexico City, 1973.

Both of these short books, obtainable at the Guadalupe Shrine in Mexico City, are devotional in content. They provide provocative glimpses into the story of the origin and development of the Guadalupe Virgin. One reads them with the understanding that both are written to promote devotion to the Virgin, and they are not academic in tone. Still, they are valuable as sources for the story of Mexico's most important shrine.

3. Bernal, Ignacio, Mexico Before Cortez, Anchor Books, Doubleday, New York, 1975.

This is a short book that reads easily but which gives important description of the cultures that produces the ancient great Meso-American civilizations. Especially valuable for the theme of syncretism is the extended treatment given to Quetzacoatl.

4. Bernal, Ignacio, The Mexican National Museum of Anthropology, Thames and Hudson, London, 1970.

Obviously, there are many displays in the Museum devoted to the religious life of the many Indian cultures in Mexico. This book describes these and presents a narrative with photographs making them useful as illustrative material of pre-Colombian religion.

5. Brenner, Anita, Idols Behind Altars, Beacon Press, Boston, 1970.

A series of essays, often poetically written, and especially helpful in Part Two for the study of religious syncretism. For example, the essay, "The Dark Madonna," describes the clash between the Indian religions and Spanish Catholicism, with the development of the Virgin of Guadalupe.

6. Diaz, Bernal, The Conquest of New Spain, Penguin Books, England, 1963.

A must-read basic reference that describes the earliest years of conquest composed by the diarist Diaz who accompanied Cortez. It is difficult to find specific references which exemplify syncretism, but the book is necessary as general background of that time.

7. Fodor, Eugene, and Robert C. Fisher, eds., Mexico, 1976, David McKay Company, Inc., New York, 1976.

Though a popular guidebook, this information becomes extremely valuable when seeking background on archaeological sites, locations, history, artifacts, etc., and is a necessary adjunct to what some guide on an escorted tour might explain to the researcher. It is useful, too, as the teacher prepares a slide program on a variety of subjects.

8. Goetz, Delia and Sylvanus G. Morley, The Popol Vuh, University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, Oklahoma, 1950.

This book comes closest to being the bible of the Meso-American Indian, containing the mythology, traditions, and history of a Mayan people. It is only because the rest of the original religious literature has been lost or destroyed, that we must now depend on this as an exalted example and a rich source for understanding the spiritual life of a people.

9. Helfritz, Hans, Mexican Cities of the Gods, Frederick A. Praeger, New York, 1968.

A book that deals strictly with the temple ruins and other archaeological sites in Meso-America. Each major site is explored in turn as to architecture, function, and religious expression taking place there. There are many helpful photographs and the book becomes a valuable adjunct for those who have had the good fortune to visit these sites in person.

10. Krickeberg, Walter, et al, Pre-Columbian American Religions, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York, 1968.

The only book I have found which treats Meso-American, North American, and South American Indians together under the aegis of religion. This alone provides an opportunity to explore themes common to all. The shortcoming of the book is that each of these is treated as a different section and written by a different author, so the reader's task is to ferret out the common themes on his/her own.

11. Leonard, Jonathan Norton and editors of Time-Life Books, Ancient American: Great Ages of Man Series, Time-Life Books, Time-Life Books, Time Incorporated, New York, 1962.

The format of photographs and diagrams make this book exciting to thumb through and the narrative is as fascinating as a novel. For one who needs an introduction to the early history of Mexico before the Conquest, who wants to gain a familiarity with those great civilizations--the Maya, Olmec, and Aztec--who would like to fascinate the student with the mystery and majesty of Mexico, this book does all that in an intensely dramatic fashion. I recommend this as a first book of general history of Mexico.

12. Leon-Portilla, Miguel, Aztec Thought and Culture, University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, Oklahoma, 1963.

Provided in this book is a comprehensive but analytic presentation of the religious philosophy of the culture of the Nahuas (or Aztecs). The book serves to dispell the common opinion of the Aztecs as a mono-motivated culture--it is indeed much more complex than this.

13. Luckert, Karl W., Olmec Religion, University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, Oklahoma, 1976.

This is a detailed, scholarly discussion of the meaning of the archaeological discoveries of Olmec civilization. It is important for tracing the use and development of such pervasive symbols in Meso-American religion as the rain-god, the jaguar, and the serpent.

14. Moctezuma, Eduardo Matos, Miccaihuitl: El Culto de Muerte, Artes de Mexico, No. 145, Mexico, 1971.

This book, actually in a graphic magazine format, presents a discussion of the Mexican Cult of the Dead. It is presented in the three languages of Spanish, English and French. As the Cult of the Dead is an example of Indian paganism in Christian dress, this becomes a useful example of syncretism.

15. Nicholson, Irene, Mexican and Central American Mythology, Paul Hamlyn, London, 1967.

This is the basic reference for a comprehensive yet detailed presentation of pre-Colombian religion. The book is replete with photographs and charts, and the narrative reads easily and interestingly. I would say that this book would be the first to read in preparing the unit on religious syncretism for classroom presentation.

16. Parkes, Henry Brumford, A History of Mexico, Houghton Mifflin Company Sentry Edition, Boston, 1969.

A straight-forward, detailed narrative of the history with an excellent, but too short chapter on the Catholic Church in Mexico, describing how paganism survived within the context of Christianity.

17. Paz, Octavio, The Labyrinth of Solitude.

This famous study of the Mexican psychological experience is especially helpful in developing classroom material on Mexican paganism, for example, the Day of the Dead, the fascination with the bloody Christ, the use of masks, fiestas. Paz presents his own insight on syncretism in the chapter "The Conquest and Colonialism."

18. Paz, Octavio, The Other Mexico: Critique of the Pyramid, Grove Press, Inc., New York, 1972.

Paz probes into the psyche of the Mexican people to find those elements of pre-Colombian Mexico which persist despite the Conquest, exemplified by the pyramid symbol and manifested in the act of student revolution in October of 1968.

19. Smith, Bradley, Mexico: A History in Art, Doubleday, Windfall, New York, 1968.

A large format book with an abundance of color photographs depicting all phases of Mexican art from temple ruins and ancient pottery figures to the modern muralists and graphic artists. Much of the art has religious motifs. It is accompanied by informative explanations.

20. Toneyama, Kojin, The Popular Arts of Mexico, Weatherhill, New York, 1974.

A large format book taking Mexico region by region and displaying regional art in a wealth of color photographs. Many kinds of folk art in Mexico are used for religious purposes and this book both displays and describes the function of the objects.

ARTICLES

1. Adams, Richard N., and Arthur J. Rubel, "Sickness and Social Relations," No. 17, Handbook of Middle-American Indians, Volume 6, Wauchope, Ekholm, and Bernal, eds.

This article treats the subjects of medical treatment using herbal cures, psychological factors, and the curandero. The emphasis though is on the social factors and the authors spend time exploring the function of religion in the cure of illness.

2. Edmonson, Munro S., "Narrative Folklore," Handbook of Middle-American Indians, Volume 6, Wauchope, Ekholm, and Bernal, eds.

The article contains a discussion of the Popol Vuh, the Feathered Serpent, and the Guadalupe Virgin. The author analyzes how the folk-tales are transformed and what social factors affect this, especially emphasizing the Spanish influence.

3. Madsen, William, "Religious Syncretism," No. 19, Handbook of Middle-American Indians, Volume 6, Wauchope, Ekholm, and Bernal, eds.

This is the single best source of material on the theme of this unit of study--religious syncretism. The article serves as a seed-bed of ideas that can then be explored in a number of other publications (many mentioned in this bibliography). The author mentions many examples of syncretism which can be used for illustration in lecture. I suggest reading this at the outset of preparing to treat the subject of syncretism.

4. Mendelson, E. Michael, "Ritual and Mythology," Handbook of Middle-American Indians, Volume 6, Wauchope, Ekholm, and Bernal, eds.

A good article on syncretism, discussing the brujo, the shaman, the function of the nagual, and certain pagan-Christian fiestas. The interesting point is made that in the realm of ethics the Catholicism of the Spanish and the paganism of the Indians differs the most.

5. Nicholson, Henry B., "Religion in Pre-Hispanic Central Mexico," No. 16, Handbook of Middle-American Indians, Volume 10, Wauchope, Ekholm, and Bernal, eds.

In this article, the author traces the historical development of a number of religious themes, including mythologies of the world's creation and cosmology, and he presents the deities that relate to a variety of civilizations. The instructor at the community college level could distill this rather complicated treatment in order to derive simplified information regarding the themes.

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